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ABSTRACT

A study explored the effects of participation in two kinds of volunteer activities--community service and child care--on adolescents' attitudes toward social and personal responsibility skill development and knowledge acquisition. It was part of an evaluation of the New York State 4-H Youth Volunteers Program. Written questionnaires, interviews with 73 participants, and testimony from 11 adult supervisors were used to document such effects. Results showed that girls and community service project participants gained more positive attitudes than did boys or child care volunteers. Ninety percent of the participants indicated the likelihood of continued volunteer work; nearly all volunteers reported gains in skills and knowledge. Adults involved in the program saw adolescents becoming more confident of their abilities, learning to make decisions and work with children, and gaining in other ways that varied according to participants' individual needs and experiences. (YLB)

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The Effect of Volunteer Experience on Early Adolescents' Social Development

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association; April 24, 1987; Washington DC.

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Abstract

Scholarly and professional judgement concur with the common sense view that there is social and educational value in adolescents engaging in responsible service in their communities. However, measurable gains in knowledge, skills, or attitudes have been difficult to document. The present study describes the effects of participation in two kinds of volunteer activities, community service and child care, on adolescents' attitudes toward social and personal responsibility, skill development, and knowledge acquisition. Written questionnaires and interviews with participants and testimony from adult supervisors were employed to document such effects. Results show that girls and community service project participants gained more positive attitudes than did boys or child care workers. Ninety percent of participants indicated the likelihood of continued volunteer work and nearly all volunteers reported gains in skills and knowledge. Implications and limitations of the findings are also discussed.

The Effect of Volunteer Experience on Early Adolescents' Social Development

Stephen F. Hamilton
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Cornell University

Scholarly and professional judgment concur with common sense in affirming the value of adolescents engaging in responsible activities in their communities. However, evaluations of the effects of community experience on adolescents have often been unable to document their value in terms of measurable improvements in attitudes, knowledge, or skill (e.g., Hamilton, 1981; Crowe & Walker, 1977). Evaluations finding positive outcomes include Bucknam and Brand's (1983) meta-analysis of studies of Experience-Based Career Education and Hamilton and Zeldin's (in press) study of interns in local government. Most relevant to the present investigation is Conrad and Hedin's (1981a) evaluation of 27 exemplary experiential learning programs, which reported positive results of several kinds. However, Newmann and Rutter (1983) were unable to replicate these results in a study using more sophisticated statistical procedures.

There are many plausible explanations for the difficulty encountered in attempting to verify empirically the predictions of theory and common sense (Hamilton, 1980). Four are particularly pertinent to this evaluation. First, the experiences young people have in the community vary enormously. There is no good reason to expect that a 12 year old who helps locate and place a bid on a building to house a community library will be affected in the same way as a 15 year old who helps in an after-school care center. Second, even within the same program, one participant may focus on a particular part of the experience and gain from it something that another participant neither needed nor wished. One child care aide might concentrate on organizing the reading corner while another spends her time learning how to encourage a shy child to

corner while another spends her time learning how to encourage a shy child to be more assertive. In both these comparisons, real and important benefits from participation vary so widely from one participant to another that any measure that averages gains across the entire group misses what really happened to individuals.

Third, if one grants that such important but idiosyncratic effects cannot be assessed by measures of specific gains and looks instead for more general changes, the phenomena of interest (e.g., self-esteem and social responsibility) are not likely to change easily or quickly precisely because they are so general. Programs of brief duration and that involve relatively few hours of participation may be quite valuable but not in ways that affect essential and enduring personal characteristics in easily measurable ways.

Fourth, using such broad measures of socially desirable characteristics to assess the effects of a voluntary program creates a double-bind for the interpreter of the results. If, as is likely, volunteer participants begin with high scores on the characteristic, then there is a risk of "ceiling effects." There is no room for upward movement and, if anything, a likelihood of regression to the mean. On the other hand, any finding of gains is open to challenge by skeptics on the reasonable grounds that such results apply only to a special, self-selected, highly motivated group, set apart by the act of volunteering. Although one can logically argue that it is pointless to ask about the effects of a voluntary program on people who do not volunteer, many are concerned about whether a program's effects are broadly generalizable and may not be impressed by its effects on an atypical sample.

Considerations such as these led us to design our evaluation of the New York State 4-H Youth Volunteers Program to include more than paper-and-pencil

measures of program impact. We employed such a measure of social responsibility, but we also asked participants to report their own perceptions of the programs' influence on them and we asked adults involved with the program to tell us how they thought the program affected youth participants. Moreover, we addressed many components of the evaluation to questions of program improvement and implementation rather than outcomes. Although those issues have been very important to us in revising and improving the program, they will not be reported here because they are of interest to a narrower audience.

We were not disinterested evaluators. The first author directs the program and both participated in its development. The program and its evaluation were funded by a grant from the Kellogg Foundation to the National 4-H Council, which in turn supported 12 programs around the country, each designed to demonstrate new and more effective means of using volunteers in 4-H. (4-H is the youth component of the Cooperative Extension system, which involves the U.S. Department of Agriculture, county governments, and the Land Grant Universities. Cornell is New York State's Land Grant University though it also has privately endowed units.) Ours was one of four programs in which youth themselves were given volunteer roles in 4-H.

METHOD

Subjects

Programs in 10 different counties involved nearly 150 youth between the ages of 11 and 17. At the time of the official conclusion of the program, six counties had completed a total of 12 different projects. These 12 projects involved as many as 87 youth volunteers 71 of whom, or 90%, completed their

respective projects. Five projects are still in progress as of this writing. This report will focus on the analysis of the 12 completed projects.

Projects were of two basic types: community improvement (or service) and child care, a category including after-school care programs and 4-H clubs. Six of each type were completed. Females outnumbered males with respect to both starters (58 to 29) and finishers (52 to 19). Females were also more likely to see a project through to completion.

Usable data were collected from 73 Youth Volunteers and 11 adult Advisors. The following descriptions of the subject sample and the analyses presented in a later section reflect the available information on these 73 youth, 50 girls and 23 boys. The mean age of participants was 14.1 years and their mean grade level was 9.0.

Projects

Of the 73 subjects described in this analysis, 39 volunteered in child care settings and 34 were involved in community improvement projects.

Community Improvement. Community improvement projects varied considerably with respect to the kinds of tasks which were undertaken. One large group of volunteers sought to work with the local Housing Authority to gut the inside of a house to be rehabilitated for low income housing but were prevented by child labor laws from doing so. The group then decided to do construction and maintenance work at the county 4-H fair site. Five original participants dropped out as a result of the change of projects.

A second group constructed and raffled off a large gingerbread house and used the proceeds to purchase and deliver food to needy families at Thanksgiving time. In the same county, another group made and delivered Christmas certerpeices to elderly residents and decorated the community church

for Christmas. In a different county where four separate projects took place, Volunteers sought and attempted to arrange for the purchase of a building for the local library, assisted the Town Historian with organizational and filing tasks, cared for animals at a local shelter, and prepared a unique program for the annual 4-H Dairy and Livestock Banquet.

Child Care. As 4-H club assistant leaders, Volunteers taught younger children how to conduct a 4-H demonstration or to make crafts. Some took the club members to nursing homes to make presentations. Two groups of Volunteers, which operated during the summer, worked as assistants in 4-H summer day camps. These summer Volunteers helped children with craft projects, supervised play periods, and taught educational units. One Fall group was recruited from a high school class and worked in an after-school care facility for elementary school children.

Materials and Procedures

Written Instuments

SPRS. All participants were asked to complete a slightly modified version of Conrad and Hedin's (1981b) Social and Personal Responsibility Scale (SPRS) both at the beginning and at the end of a project. The scale measures the extent to which respondents express responsible attitudes toward social welfare and personal duty, a sense of competence to take responsibility, a sense of efficacy regarding their ability to fulfill responsibilities, and the perception that they do perform responsible acts. The instrument contains 21 questions with each item rated on a 4-point scale indicating the extent to which a particular facet of personal or social responsibility is indicated.

Two subscales were identified for inclusion in the analysis. The first one assessed attitudes toward society's obligation to meet the needs of

others. The second assessed respondents' perception of their personal responsibility, competence, efficacy, and performance ability toward others in need.

The full SPRS has good reliability (Chronbach's alpha = 0.73) as do the two subscales for attitudes toward social responsibility at the societal level (alpha = 0.73) and the personal level (alpha = 0.68).

Three questions were added to the SPRS for youth involved in child care volunteer work. These questions, using the same format, tapped participants' attitudes toward society's responsibility for meeting the needs of children. This scale demonstrated high reliability (alpha = 0.95).

Additional Written Measures. Volunteers indicated on the post-test questionnaire the extent to which they enjoyed, felt useful and challenged, and made a difference to the project. This measure also assessed the likelihood that individuals would volunteer again for a similar project with other youth. Responses to these questions were on a 4-point scale (5 items, alpha = 0.69).

Journals. Volunteers were asked to keep written journals during the course of the projects in which they participated. The journals kept by the youth engaged in child care were predominately quantitative; respondents indicated the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a series of 9 statements regarding their volunteer day (alpha = 0.78). The statements attempted to tap Volunteers' satisfaction with their role as recipients of program benefits and as resources to the people in their setting. Youth were asked to fill out their journals as soon as possible after their volunteer work day.

Community improvement journals were more reflective, asking respondents to write briefly about the tasks performed and the barriers and gateways toward doing their jobs that they faced on a given work day. These Volunteers were also asked to grade (from A to F) their individual and group accomplishments as well as the group's ability to work together. Journals were filled out individually or during biweekly "Give & Take Sessions" conducted by the adult Advisor.

Interviews

Personal interviews were held with a sample of participants at the conclusion of a project. In all, 18 child care and 15 community improvement Volunteers were interviewed (3 of the latter interviews were conducted on the phone). Interviews assessed Volunteers' perceptions of the amount of responsibility and opportunity for decision making they had, as well as whether they viewed the experience as enjoyable and challenging, and the extent to which they felt useful to the project. The impact of the adult Advisor on the individual Volunteer and the group was also queried as was each Volunteer's assessment of the skills and personal insights learned as a result of the program. In addition, the Volunteers' assessment of the carryover value of the experience and their recommendations for program improvements were also obtained.

RESULTS

Attitude Change

The 21-question adaptation of Conrad and Hedin's (1981b) Social and Personal Responsibility Scale (SPRS) appears to be quite sensitive to respondents' volunteer activity as youth participants who reported at least some previous volunteer work scored significantly higher on the pre-project

administration of the instrument than did those without previous volunteer experience, $t(38) = 2.22$, $p = .026$.

Analyses of variance and t-tests were computed to determine the extent of change in the social responsibility and personal responsibility subscales as well as the total scale by using the post-test scores (administered at the end of the project) as dependent variables and pre-test scores as covariates. Program effects were then compared for youth from both younger (age 14 and under) and older (age 15 and over) age groups, boys and girls, and participants in the two types of projects, either community improvement or child care. Interaction effects were also investigated.

Paired-samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant gains in either attitude scores toward personal responsibility or total attitude scores. Regression analyses revealed that the pre-test total attitude scores accounted for 36 percent of the variance in post-test scores ($p = .016$). In addition, few of the groups mentioned above differed with respect to such gains. Girls' total attitude scores improved more than did boys' ($F(1,35) = 4.678$, $p = .037$).

With respect to the responsibility of society to help needy people, several comparisons were statistiscally significant. On this subscale, girls improved more than boys ($F(1,35) = 7.720$, $p = .009$) and community improvement workers more than child care volunteers ($F(1,35) = 4.532$, $p = .040$). There was no significant difference in gain scores between younger and older youth. Interaction effects were also found, including a sex-by-project-type interaction ($F(1,35) = 6.846$, $p = .013$) and a sex-by-age-group effect, ($F(1,35) = 4.793$, $p = .035$). Interaction effects indicate that boys involved in

child care programs and boys in the older age group demonstrated the smallest gains in attitudes toward social responsibility.

With respect to child care programs, older youth showed a slightly greater improvement in attitudes toward meeting the needs of children than did younger youth ($F(1,42)=4.630, p=.037$). In addition, journal entries made by older youth demonstrated a higher perception of themselves as serving as a resource ($F(1,23)=3.372$, $p=.079$) and as benefitting from the project, ($F(1,23)=3.678$, $p=.068$) than did younger youth, to a marginally significant degree.

Other quantitative indicators of program effects on attitudes were also found. For example, 90 percent of all volunteers indicated that they are either likely or sure to continue volunteer work in the near future. (Some had already begun to do so.) With respect to program types, youth in the community improvement programs indicated on the post questionnaire that they were more likely to volunteer again in the near future than those in the child care programs ($F(1,34)=8.334$, $p=.007$) although the community improvement Volunteers did not evaluate their programs more positively (that is, as more challenging or enjoyable or themselves as more useful or carrying more responsibility). There was a marginally significant sex-by-age group of volunteer interaction with respect to self-reported likelihood of volunteering in the near future ($F(1,34)=3.431$, $p=.073$). Specifically, although there were no age group differences for girls, older boys were more likely than younger ones to expect to volunteer again.

In sum, there is some indication in the quantitative data collected from volunteers that attitudes toward the responsibility of society towards those in need improved during the course of the projects. In addition, there is an

indication that youth, especially those who served in community improvement programs, were committed to volunteer work following their involvement in their respective projects. The findings also indicate that girls are more likely to improve their attitudes toward social responsibility than boys as a result of volunteer work.

All four reasons listed in the introduction why it is difficult to demonstrate positive outcomes from experiential learning programs are likely to have contributed to the limited gains in attitudes toward social responsibility and volunteerism documented here. Approximately 85 percent of all Volunteers had previous volunteer experience, largely through 4-H. These Volunteers demonstrated high levels of commitment to helping others before the program actually began. Most participated for only eight weeks, too short a period of time in which to experience profound attitude changes.

Knowledge and Skills Growth

Growth in individual youths' knowledge and skills was assessed from interviews with a sample of Youth Volunteers, Volunteers' journal entries, and written summaries of observed individual progress from adult Advisors. A total of 33 youth, 18 in child care and 15 in community improvement programs, were interviewed soon after the completion of a particular project. As was found through the questionnaires given to all Volunteers, most of those who were interviewed (78 percent) said that they were likely or sure to volunteer again or had already begun a new volunteer project. Eighty-four percent of the Volunteers in child care programs said that they had learned something about children and 77 percent of all Volunteers were able to report having learned something about themselves.

Knowledge about children. With respect to working with children, the more common kinds of knowledge gained dealt with how best to discipline (by explaining to a child or having the child take a time out rather than yelling or hitting) and that young children are generally quite responsive and more attentive than many thought. One girl, who was an assistant 4-H club leader, said:

> Every kid grows differently mentally and physically. They want to grow. They want to show you they know what they're doing and that you can depend on them. I think that's what every kid wants: for you to be able to think that you can depend on them. They like to be able to make things and feel proud of themselves when they're finished.

A Volunteer in an after-school care program, summarized what she learned about children as follows:

> I learned how to discipline children a lot better. I learned that I didn't have to yell all the time at the kids, that if you just sit down and talk to them then they understand better.

Knowledge about self. Approximately 77 percent of Volunteers interviewed reported having learned something about themselves. Comments from child care workers indicated that they learned they were more or, in one case, less patient than they thought and that they were able to take responsibility for a project and carry it through. One said:

> I learned I could be more involved and not as intimidated by kids. Before I started the program kids used to intimidate me a little.

Community improvement Volunteers also reported learning that they could be patient and that they could follow through on a project. They reported learning that they had talents, such as decorating cookies and speaking in front of a large gathering, of which they were previously unaware. Reflecting on her public speaking experience, one Volunteer told us:

> I found that I can keep a group of people interested in what I am

> saying. I had my doubts about my ability to stand up in front of a group of people (before the project began).

Knowledge about others. Several of the community improvement projects provided opportunities for gaining knowledge about some of the functions and needs of individuals and groups in the community. A 12 year-old boy in the gingerbread house project, told us:

> Being a volunteer in the project helped me understand that more people than you think need to be remembered and need something to eat.

Two of the youth who worked with the Town Historian said they had not known there was such a person before, and that they had gained new information about some of their ancestors and about "interesting things about (their) town." Volunteers who sought to purchase property for a library expansion learned about the functions of a realtor and an attorney with respect to property transactions and about "the legal parts" of a contract of sale. The dairy and livestock banquet Volunteers selected slides from 4-H functions over the preceding four decades, learning about changes in fashions and activities in the process.

Skill Development. Some projects provided more opportunities for skill development than others. Many of the 4-H property renovators reported learning about and developing skills in several aspects of construction, including planning, drawing, measuring, cutting, hammering, assembling a wood frame, fitting sheetrock, spackling, and painting. Other skills learned in some of the projects, some which have been alluded to already, include disciplining and keeping the interest of small children, public speaking, crafts, and doing comparative shopping at a grocery store.

Additional Benefits to the Self. Most of the youth interviewed reported enjoying their work (94 percent) as well as feeling useful (91 percent) and

challenged (79 percent). What made the projects enjoyable for the youth was "being with someone else" or with a group and knowing that they were doing something for other people. Usefulness was expressed by the youth in terms of providing fresh ideas to adult 4-H leaders, teaching useful skills to children, conducting 4-H club meetings, providing "an extra pair of hands" in an after-school program or summer camp, and being able to help one's town. Leading activities in 4-H clubs or after-school programs which would keep kids interested, and handling discipline problems were considered challenging. An after-school Volunteer offered the following comments:

> I thought I was pretty useful. There were a lot of kids there and sometimes it was really hard to handle the whole group. It was really helpful to have volunteers there. The adults told us they really appreciated our help. I felt more grown up in this situation because I think they gave me more responsibility. The kids always seemed happy to see us.

A construction Volunteer appreciated the opportunity afforded her by the 4-H building renovation project to be able to take the initiative rather than having someone else tell what to do as is usually the case. According to her, "The main benefit was having to figure it out for myself."

The carryover effect of the volunteer work was evidenced in the interviews as well. Many child care workers recognized the potential benefits of their work for future employment and family responsibilities. One girl saw her experience as a "practice job." She said she learned "a lot" in terms of skills for future jobs.

> I want to be a child social worker with little kids. I learned what the kids are like, how they react to things. They are fun and different (from each other).

Most Volunteers saw some real life application in the knowledge and skills they learned in child care, construction, public speaking, comparison

shopping, organizing files, and organizing their own lives in fulfilling the goals of their projects. One reported the following carryover effects:

> I've been more responsible in school. I've done more extra work that isn't assigned.

Adult Testimony

Written assessments of observed changes in volunteers given by adult advisors indicated that most youths benefitted from participating in their projects. For example, volunteering to make Christmas decorations for elderly people and for the community's church enabled one young girl to gain confidence in herself and a boy to demonstrate a positive attitude toward helping which differed markedly with his reputed problem behavior both in and out of school. The Advisor of one 4-H child care group described all five of her Volunteers as having gained in confidence, capabilities in working with kids, maturity, or friendliness.

Another adult Advisor wrote the following about one of the two child care Volunteers she supervised:

> At first Sandra was shy and did not offer anything, but they she began to enjoy the association with the younger children. As time went on she extended herself more and gained greatly in confidence.

Interviews with Adults

Seven volunteer adult Advisors and three 4-H agents were interviewed or individually tape recorded their responses to written questions about the Youth Volunteers and their projects. Many of the questions were about procedural issues such as deviations from the program model and evaluations of supportive materials. These responses were used in revising the materials but will not be reported here. Some questions asked about the adults' perceptions of participation's impact on Youth Volunteers.

Making Decisions. Four adults said one of the hardest things for youth to do, especially in the community improvement project, was to choose for themselves what to do. Apparently young people are so accustomed to having adults tell them what to do and how to do it that they find it difficult to accept responsibility for making those decisions themselves. An agent said that those he worked with (in an Advisor's role) became more confident of their abilities to make decisions as the project unfolded and they discovered they could do it.

The Advisor of a group of girls serving as child care aides said that only one had really taken initiative and planned activities for the children as the director wanted them to do. The others seemed content to play with the children and read to them and seemed to fear that if they planned something it would interfere.

A community service project Advisor admitted that it was hard for her too. She said she could have used more concrete examples of possible projects: "Things seemed so wide open that I floundered."
Another noted that

> This particular group had completed community service projects before but had never been in charge of them. They have learned how to choose a project and how to carry things out.

An experienced 4-H club leader advising the group that planned and led the county dairy and livestock banquet, said the project had affected her too.

> I have had a tendency to tell the teens what we're going to do and how. It's difficult for me to back off and let the kids do it. I'd prefer to have more control over the outcome. Working with these kids has helped me and I'm going to try to involve other kids more in the future so they know how much work is involved in organizing things. Let them go home exhausted instead of me!

Learning to Work with Children. Comments from Advisors of child care projects echoed the Youth Volunteers' statements. Youth given responsibility

for younger children in group settings find their knowledge and abilities stretched, especially regarding discipline. Most early adolescents have only been on the receiving end of discipline and have never had to think very much about how to get a younger person to behave appropriately. According to one Advisor:

> I think the skills they are learning involve how to deal with children. They seem to show more self-confidence and express feeling more confidence as a result of the program.

An agent who served as an Advisor to girls who were assistant 4-H club leaders said that the journals all Youth Volunteers were asked to fill out after each volunteer experience helped the girls examine their own leadership style.

Diverse Impact. The diversity of youth and of their responses to the program was a theme in many adults' statements, confirming the point made in the introduction. The Advisor of a community improvement project said that getting to know the youth and seeing the differences among them was the best part of the experience for her.

> It was good to get to know the different kids. It was challenging because of the age span. There's a difference between 11 year olds and 16 year olds and between boys and girls. They all came with different "packages" -- different levels of experience and ways of working with others. The younger ones didn't always have the attention span. You had to manage them differently. Those young boys were just young. They were not as resourceful as the young girls. They need more guidance. To see this wide range of kids was great for me. Some were accustomed to working as a team. Some were motivated to work by themselves. They all got different things out of the project.

The Advisor for the group that planned and led the annual dairy and livestock banquet specified how the experience had helped each of the four participants differently.

> Jane is naturally outgoing but never had any public speaking experience. This was a good start for her. Barbara learned she can work with people outside her usual clique and still have a good time. George is terribly shy but felt comfortable enough to do a

> super job on this project. Bill is very capable but lacks self-confidence. This helped him.

Satisfaction and Plans to Continue. Five adults referred to Volunteers' statements regarding their satisfaction with the experience and their hopes to continue as evidence that participation had been a positive experience for them. One added the qualification that several of the assistant 4-H club leaders did not think they had been given many important tasks and were, as a result, willing to continue only for specific purposes. Another Advisor for assistant club leaders said:

> Agents need to let older kids know there is an opportunity to lead clubs. Kids who love animals will continue but other 14 year olds will be bored with 4-H. This program could keep them in another three or four years.

CONCLUSIONS

The data presented above suggest that participation as a Youth Volunteer has some positive effects on adolescents' pro-social attitudes, upon their developing sense of themselves, and upon the knowledge and skills they exercise in their voluntary activities. A study such as this cannot prove unequivocally that a program is beneficial or that the benefits justify the costs, especially in view of the difficulties inherent in documenting program effects. It can, however, provide indicators of effectiveness, which is what we believe this study has done.

Scores on the societal responsibility subscale of the Social and Personal Responsibility Scale showed that girls gained more than boys and that Volunteers in community improvement programs gained more than those in child care programs. High pretest scores may have limited gains on the total SPRS. The proportion of male participants was rather small. Given the non-random nature of the groups and differences in the populations from which the

different Volunteer groups were drawn, it would be unwise to place too much confidence in differences among Volunteers.

More substantively significant were Volunteers' assertions that they were likely to volunteer again in the future (90%) and the testimony of adults. Adults involved in the program saw adolescents becoming more confident of their abilities, learning to make decisions and work with children, and gaining in other ways that varied according to participants' individual needs and experiences. Moreover, the youth themselves, in questionnaires, journals, and interviews, related learning about themselves, about how to work with others, and about how to carry out their particular responsibilities, whether they involved child care, building a wall, or speaking in front of a large group.

Our reliance upon self-reports and the testimony of adults close to the program reveals an assumption that in situations such as these young people and the adults they work with know what is good for them. If this assumption is correct, then the high rate of interest in future volunteering and the low dropout rate (at least among girls) are perhaps the strongest evidence of the program's favorable effects.

Ultimately, however, any measures, regardless of how psychometrically valid and convincing they might be, are no more than indicators for the most important long-range consequences. What we really hope the Youth Volunteers program does is to impel young people toward a lifetime of civic responsibility, expressed in many and diverse ways. What matters most is the behavior that follows the experience and endures over time and in other places.

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